**"UNDER THE MASK"**
**ZIMBABWE PEACE PROJECT WRITTEN CASE STUDY**

# Defending civic space in Zimbabwe

**Civil society organizations (CSOs) from across the country met under the Civil Society Collaboration Platform to discuss, strategize, propose, and implement joint advocacy on restrictive regulations, protocols, and bills that will further limit the operating space. Plans are underway to have a broad collection of CSOs jointly advocate against the proposed Private Voluntary Organisations Amendment bill, which has been announced in the Government Gazette.**

## Executive Summary

The emergence of COVID-19 resulted in the weaponization of the law, which further restricted rights and freedoms guaranteed in the Constitution of Zimbabwe. The government enforced statutory instruments that seek to limit the spread of the virus but have also infringed on the rights of citizens.

Unfortunately, most people do not have access to platforms to report violations of their rights. The Zimbabwe Peace Project (ZPP) is working to change that. We developed a mobile application, called SPECC, to allow citizens to report rights violations. Reports can be made anonymously to protect citizens' identities.

The SPECC application provides a platform for citizens to report rights violations, anonymously if they so wish or fear victimization.

Civil society organizations have also been impacted by the restrictive regulations. They face impending enactment of laws that will further limit civic operating space. The COVID-19 lockdown restrictions have provided an environment where bills are signed into law overnight without the required or adequate consultations. Some of these bills seek to impose greater surveillance on the work of civil society. This project seeks to bring civil society organizations together to strategize and advocate to stop those restrictive bills from becoming law.

## Project description

Zimbabwe continues to be in a human rights crisis where the state infringes the rights of citizens with impunity. Throughout the pandemic, the government has used COVID-19 as an excuse to suspend the constitutional rights of citizens. Rights such as the rights to demonstrate and petition, personal security, freedom of assembly, freedom of movement, freedom of speech have been under direct attack. The state security agents are at the fore of abusing the rights of citizens, contrary to the provisions of the Constitution of Zimbabwe that stipulates their protection role.

ZPP has recorded a spike in human rights violations. From April through December 2020, there were 2,302 violations that were documented and verified. That's compared with 1,696 violations for the same period in 2019. The state security forces constituted 74.8% of the perpetrators during this period. Today, they continue to violate the rights of citizens through assault, arbitrary arrests, and extortion. There are trust and confidence deficits between citizens and institutions, including state security agents.

ZPP has developed a mobile application, SPECC, hosted on Google Play Store to allow citizens to report human rights violations. ZPP intends to launch a Social Political Economic Civil and Cultural rights (SPECC) campaign, which is expected to identify 30 SPECC App ambassadors drawn from various constituencies in Zimbabwe. The ambassadors will assist in popularizing the SPECC App and enhance citizens' understanding of the need to report human rights violations. ZPP will also share Information, Education, and Communication material (IEC) with citizens, encouraging them to exercise their rights and report COVID-19-related human rights violations.

ZPP proposes to air radio jingles in local languages (Shona, Ndebele and Tonga and sign language) spreading the campaign nationwide. In terms of collaboration, ZPP will set up a Civil Society Collaborating Platform, which will be a monthly meeting to engage partners and community-based organizations that will identify and implement joint advocacy efforts. In addition, the organization also intends to produce a discussion paper "Criminalizing Human Rights Work in the midst of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe."

This paper will be shared with the Parliamentary Portfolio Committees on Defence, Home Affairs and Security Services, and the Justice, Legal and Parliamentary Affairs over a breakfast roundtable discussion.
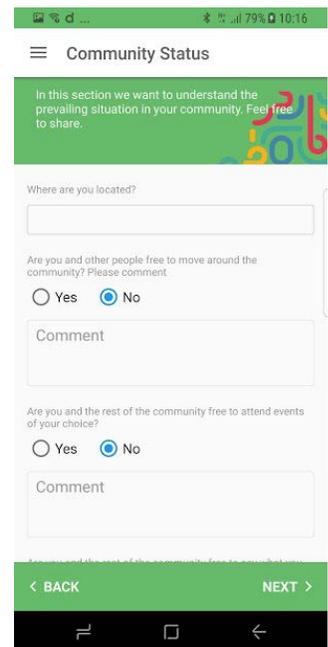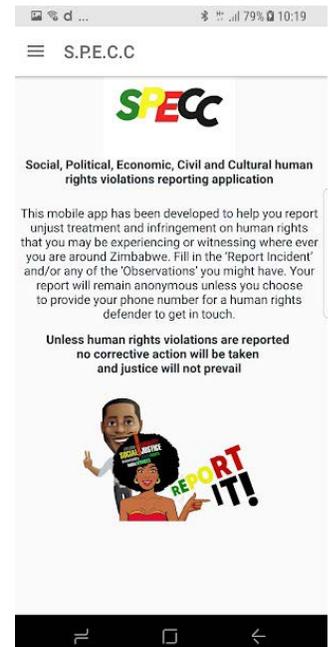
Screenshots of SPECC app.

*Photos: Google Play store*

## Challenges and objectives

**The goal** of the project is open, safe, civic space in Zimbabwe.

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**The project objective** is to strengthen citizens and civil society engagement platforms that seek to influence the opening of civic space.

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Civic space is shrinking in Zimbabwe. The efforts of this project are to work to keep the operating space open and safe for citizens to express themselves. Civil society in Zimbabwe has been fragmented in the past when faced with legal challenges or targeting of some institutions. A strengthened collaboration of civil society organizations will produce far-reaching, positive results, which will ultimately impact citizens for the better.

The challenges that the project faced include:

- Constant increase in data costs, making the downloading and use of the SPECC application beyond the reach of many citizens in Zimbabwe. Internet service providers in Zimbabwe have been increasing their data tariffs almost monthly, making the purchase of mobile data prohibitive for most.
- As a mitigation to the high data costs, ZPP realized that citizens preferred using ShareIt to obtain the SPECC app on their devices. Use of ShareIt increased the number of citizens with the application. However, ZPP has not been able to accurately calculate the exact number of citizens with SPECC on their devices.
- Obtaining confirmations from the Parliamentary Portfolio Committees for the Roundtable has been difficult.

### How your actions helped protect civic space

The work of the SPECC ambassadors and popularizing the application in the media, particularly social media, increased the SPECC downloads on Google Play from 134 at the start of the project to 168.

ZPP realized that with the high cost of mobile phone data in Zimbabwe, downloading SPECC from the Google Play store was not affordable for most citizens. The SPECC ambassadors were trained to use device-to-device applications like ShareIt to share SPECC, reducing data usage. Consultations with the 30 SPECC ambassadors showed that they had shared the SPECC app using ShareIt with more than 300 citizens. Unfortunately, we are not able to accurately calculate the full number of shares via ShareIt. The popularizing of SPECC was evidenced by the increase in the number of human rights violations documented through the application, from nine cases to 57 since the start of the project.

Civil society had been fragmented in the past and did not speak with one voice. This project has helped CSOs come together to deliberate on, design strategies, and agree on advocacy plans that are priority for citizens in Zimbabwe, and the CSOs themselves. The Civil Society Collaboration Platform has become an important platform for CSOs to interface with each other. Each meeting has had approximately 30 organizations represented, from various parts of the country. These organizations are now speaking with one voice, to advocate and fight against a retrogressive bill that will affect most CSOs.

# Results

ZPP sought to introduce, strengthen, and maintain platforms for more citizens to call out perpetrators of human rights violations–including the government and other duty bearers–and demand accountability, thereby protecting civic space. The project has been able to introduce two main platforms for citizens to do so. The two platforms are the Civil Society Collaboration Platform where CSOs from across the country have met monthly to deliberate on advocacy strategies to keep civic space open. These meetings have been successful, and CSOs realize the importance of the space created and the need for its continuation till citizens are able to freely exercise their rights. The second is the mobile application that has given citizens a tool in their hands to report human rights violations and begin the process of holding the perpetrators to account.

## The indicators for the project were:

Increase in human rights violations reported via SPECC App from nine on July 15, 2021 to 240 by the end of November 2021.

20 civil society organisations and community-based organizations that participate in the convened Civil Society Collaboration Platforms between July 15 and Nov. 30, 2021.

The project has convened three Civil Society Collaboration Platforms to date. In each meeting, more than 25 civil society and community-bsed organiaations were represented.

Three CSO-led advocacy initiatives implemented – between July 15 and Nov. 30, 2021

The increase in human rights violations reported via SPECC app has been realized. Violations are reported almost daily. The target of 240 violations by the end of November will be reached through the combined efforts of the SPECC ambassadors, popularizing the application on social media and the actions of staff in spreading the SPECC message. ZPP staff and some stakeholders have taken to wearing SPECC branded t-shirts and masks, particularly on Fridays, to spread the information wider. As staff go about their work, and after work leisure activities, SPECC is being broadcast via the IEC materials. Some partners have begun competitions on social media encouraging citizens to download the application, with SPECC branded t-shirts as prizes.

This has contributed to an increase in downloads and awareness of the SPECC app.

Several CSO-led advocacy initiatives have been implemented. That includes the advocacy initiative on citizens' right to documentation. There are thousands of citizens who do not have birth certificates and national identity documents as a result of several factors. The encouraging outcomes which have been realised are to do with the commitment by the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Home Affairs to investigate the challenge of a lack of documentation many citizens are experiencing and engage the Registrar General's office. The Registrar General's office is responsible for providing birth certificates and national identity documents to citizens. We were advised that the Registrar General's office was engaged by the PPC on Home Affairs on the matter, and they were tasked with producing a strategy for reaching citizens requiring documents. Our efforts for a follow up engagement with the Registrar General's office were not successful. We shall continue our efforts to engage them on implementing their strategy, once it is approved. encouraging outcomes have been realized. The third advocacy initiative is ongoing, which is to rally citizens to reject the proposed Private Voluntary Organisations Amendment bill during public consultations.

## Future Plans

Project plans are to continue with and strengthen the Civil Society Collaboration Platform, by including more organizations. Discussions have indicated the need to have a similar platform for heads of coalitions. Discussions have indicated the need to have a similar platform for heads of coalitions, which would enhance our efforts.

ZPP wants to continue the campaign into 2022 and would like to continue the Civil Society Collaboration Platform and the SPECC application further to 2023. As civic space continues to close, the need for CSOs to work together to advocate becomes even greater.

Citizens' use of the SPECC application will also become even more important as a channel where citizens can voice their concerns and document rights violations. Zimbabwe is set to hold harmonized elections in 2023. Election periods in the country have a history of being violent, where civil liberties are disregarded in the interest of winning the ballot.

ZPP will merge the SPECC campaign with an anti-violence campaign #RRRV2023 (Resist, Reject and Report Violence)

### Call to action

ZPP calls on rights-oriented individuals, organizsations, and movements to push against the unconstitutional PVO Amendment Bill together with civil society organizsations in Zimbabwe.

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